

LEARNING ABOUT PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION PROCESS IN THE USA

Tetiana DATSKA (Kirovohrad, Ukraine)

The paper is an overview of presidential election process in the USA with the Ukrainian learner in mind. It presents a compilation of sources that dwell on those aspects of US elections that are different from the Ukrainian system. The paper also provides a glossary of words that pertain to the peculiarities of electoral process in the USA.

Key words: presidential election, caucus, primary, popular vote, Electoral College.

Стаття є оглядом процесу президентських виборів у США і написана для українських студентів, які вивчають англійську мову як фах. У компіляції джерел, які розкривають особливості виборчої системи США, більше уваги звертається на ті аспекти, які відмінні від української системи. Пропонується також короткий глосарій слів, які описують особливості виборчої системи США.

Ключові слова: вибори президента, закриті попередні вибори, відкриті попередні вибори, голоси виборців (народне голосування), колегія виборщиків.

Much in the media news of 2012 was about the presidential election in the U.S.A. and it was not hard to notice that the U.S. election process is in some aspects different from the Ukrainian system and therefore not easily / completely understood by the learners of English while such topics as U.S. State System / Elections / Political Parties constitute a segment of the socio- and linguocultural competency that is expected of a modern EFL user as specified in the national English Language Curriculum for Universities [2: 7-8, 85].

It would also be fair to mention that the aspects that relate to the topic U.S. Presidential Election are covered in various sources on the U.S.A. that English learners can use [1; 3; 4; 5; 6, etc], but it happens these sources provide the reader with some general fragmentary information that lacks coherence in the first place and, secondly, does not help the Ukrainian learner of English to grasp the specifics that make U.S. process of election different from the Ukrainian one.

Thus **the aim of this paper** is to present the U.S. presidential election process as a coherent cycle of events and to dwell in more detail on some aspects of the presidential election process that are different from the Ukrainian one. The paper is intended to be used by the students majoring in English or any learner interested in the ways American democratic institutions work.

It is obvious that the U.S. presidential election system is a complicated one given the number of variations each state and political party may have concerning the registration rules, holding primaries and other election procedures. So the key point of this paper is to describe the process in general yet interdependent terms that will provide the learner with the basic understanding of the U.S. electoral process.

Generally speaking the presidential election process includes such stages and events as: 1) *selecting the candidates*, which takes place in the first half of the election year through caucuses / primaries and the conventions of the major parties; 2) *election campaign*, which officially begins in September and finishes in November; 3) *popular vote*, which is traditionally conducted on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November; 4) *Electoral College vote* in December; 5) *Inauguration Ceremony* on January 20th of the year following the election.

In the following paragraphs we will differentiate between the popular and *Electoral College vote* and dwell in more detail on selecting the presidential candidates as these notions appear to present more difficulty for Ukrainian learners.

Probably the thing which is most confusing for the Ukrainian students is the *Electoral College* and the difference between the popular vote and the Electoral College vote. As for the Electoral College, it is a controversial mechanism of presidential election that was created by the framers of the U.S. Constitution as a compromise for the presidential election process. At the time, some politicians believed a purely popular election was too reckless, while others objected to giving Congress the power to select the president. The compromise was to set up an Electoral College system that allowed voters to vote for electors, who would then cast their votes for candidates, a system described in Article II, section 1 of the Constitution [7].

A very simplistic explanation for the way the Electoral College works could be the following. After the people of the USA vote in the presidential election in November, their ballots are counted, and then the person with the biggest percentage of the votes in a particular state is announced to have won the election in that state. At this stage there comes in force the 'winner-take-all' principle, according to which all the Electoral College votes from the state will go to the winner of the election in it. Electors of the Electoral College cast their votes in states' capitals in December and the results of the Electoral College vote are the official and final stage of the election process. In other words, the people voting in November do not vote for the President directly, but do it to instruct the electors in Electoral College whom to vote for.

Talking about the composition of the Electoral College it should be mentioned that each state has a number of electors equal to the number of its U.S. senators plus the number of its U.S. representatives. Currently, the Electoral College includes 538 electors, 535 for the total number of congressional members, and three who represent Washington, D.C., as allowed by the 23rd

Amendment. On the Monday following the second Wednesday in December, the electors of each state gather in their respective state capitals to officially cast their votes for president and vice president. These votes are then sealed and sent to the president of the Senate, who on January 6th opens and reads the votes in the presence of both houses of Congress thus formally ratifying the result of the election. A candidate must gain 270 of the 538 votes to win the election [ibid.].

Most of the time, electors cast their votes for the candidate who has received the most votes in that particular state. Some states have laws that require electors to vote for the candidate that won the popular vote, while other electors are bound by pledges to a specific political party. However, there have been times when electors have voted contrary to the people's decision, and there is no federal law or Constitutional provision against it.

Electoral College was established to provide a system that would select the most qualified president and vice president. Historians have suggested a variety of reasons for the adoption of the Electoral College, including concerns about the separation of powers and the relationship between the executive and legislative branches, the balance between small and large states, slavery, and the perceived dangers of direct democracy [8].

The framers of the Constitution established a system for electing the president – the electoral college, but they did not devise a method for nominating presidential candidates or even for choosing electors. They assumed that the selection process as a whole would be nonpartisan and devoid of factions (or political parties), which they believed were always a corrupting influence in politics [9], and at the beginning each state was free to devise its own system of choosing electors and different methods were used in different states. In some states electors were appointed by the legislature, in others they were popularly elected, and in still others a mixed approach was used. By the 1830s all states except South Carolina chose electors by direct popular vote [ibid.].

The subsequent formation and rapid development of political parties soon changed the methods of selecting presidential candidates making the process more partisan. Hence here comes the necessity to describe how the caucus and primary election systems work.

Nowadays the word *caucus* is defined as any political group or meeting organized to further a special interest or cause [10]. The word caucus originated in Boston in the early part of the 18th century, when it was used as the name of a political club, the Caucus, or Caucus Club. The club hosted public discussions and the election of candidates for public office. Beginning in 1796, caucuses of the parties' congressional delegations met informally to nominate their presidential and vice presidential candidates, leaving the general public with no direct input.

In its subsequent and current usage in the United States, the term came to denote a meeting of either party managers or duty voters, as in "nominating caucus," which nominates candidates for office or selects delegates for a nominating convention. The caucus of a party's members in Congress nominated its candidates for the office of president and vice president from 1796 until 1824.

The word *caucus* is used in both British and American politics. The American use of the term denotes a faction within a legislative body that attempts to further its interests by influencing either party policy on proposed legislation or legislative offices; hence such bodies as the Black Caucus (representing African Americans) and the Women's Caucus [10].

Currently the more usual practice of selecting presidential candidates is through primary election, or primary, which in the United States is an election to select candidates to run for public office [9].

Primaries may be *closed (partisan)*, allowing only declared party members to vote, or *open (nonpartisan)*, enabling all voters to choose which party's primary they wish to vote in without declaring any party affiliation. Primaries may be direct or indirect. A direct primary, which is now used in some form in all U.S. states, functions as a preliminary election whereby voters decide their party's candidates. In an indirect primary, voters elect delegates who choose the party's candidates at a nominating convention [11].

Most delegates to the *national conventions* of the Democratic and Republican parties are selected through primaries or caucuses and are pledged to support a particular candidate. Each state party determines the date of its primary or caucus. Historically, Iowa held its caucus in mid-February, followed a week later by a primary in New Hampshire; the campaign season then ran

through early June, when primaries were held in states such as New Jersey and California. Winning in either Iowa or New Hampshire—or at least doing better than expected there—often boosted a campaign, while faring poorly sometimes led candidates to withdraw. Accordingly, candidates often spent years organizing grassroots support in these states.

Because of criticism that Iowa and New Hampshire were unrepresentative of the country and exerted too much influence in the nomination process, several other states began to schedule their primaries earlier. By 2008 some 40 states had scheduled their primaries or caucuses for January or February; few primaries or caucuses are now held in May or June. For the 2008 campaign, several states attempted to blunt the influence of Iowa and New Hampshire by moving their primaries and caucuses to January, forcing Iowa to hold its caucus on January 3 and New Hampshire its primary on January 8. Some states, however, scheduled primaries earlier than the calendar sanctioned by the Democratic and Republican National Committees, and, as a result, both parties either reduced or, in the case of the Democrats, stripped states violating party rules of their delegates to the national convention [9].

The next stage in the election process is the conventions of Democratic and Republican parties. In a general sense political / party convention is a meeting of delegates of a political party at the local, state, provincial, or national level to select candidates for office and to decide party policy. As representative organs of political parties, party conventions also may elect executive committees of the parties and adopt rules governing the party's organization. In practice they also act as rallies for the election campaigns that follow.

Before the development of conventions in the United States in the 1830s, American political parties selected candidates and policies in informal caucuses of the parties' congressional delegations [12].

One important consequence of the primaries being held earlier is that the nominees of both major parties are now usually determined by March or April. To secure a party's nomination, a candidate must win the votes of a majority of the delegates attending the convention. (More than 4,000 delegates attend the Democratic convention, while the Republican convention usually comprises some 2,500 delegates.) In most Republican primaries the candidate who wins the statewide popular vote is awarded all the state's delegates. By contrast, the Democratic Party requires that delegates be allocated proportionally to each candidate who wins at least 15 percent of the popular vote. It thus takes Democratic candidates longer than Republican candidates to amass the required majority. In 1984 the Democratic Party created a category of "superdelegates," who are unpledged to any candidate. Consisting of federal officeholders, governors, and other high-ranking party officials, they usually constitute 15 to 20 percent of the total number of delegates. Other Democratic delegates are required on the first ballot to vote for the candidate whom they are pledged to support, unless that candidate has withdrawn from consideration. If no candidate receives a first-ballot majority, the convention becomes open to bargaining, and all delegates are free to support any candidate.

The Democratic and Republican nominating conventions are held during the summer prior to the November general election. The party that holds the presidency usually holds its convention second. Shortly before the convention, the presidential candidate selects a vice presidential running mate, often to balance the ticket ideologically or geographically or to shore up one or more of the candidate's perceived weaknesses.

The conventions mark the formal start of the general election campaign (although the traditional starting date of the general election campaign is Labor Day, the first Monday in September), and they provide the candidates with a large national audience and an opportunity to explain their agendas to the American public.

A candidate's general election strategy is largely dictated by the electoral college system. All states except Maine and Nebraska follow the unit rule, by which all of a state's electoral votes are awarded to the candidate who receives the most popular votes in that state. Candidates therefore focus their resources and time on large states, and they tend to ignore states that are considered safe for one party or the other and states with few electoral votes.

Modern presidential campaigns are media driven, as candidates spend millions of dollars on television advertising designed to generate favorable media coverage. The most widely viewed

campaign spectacles are the debates between the Democratic and Republican presidential and vice presidential candidates.

Only on rare occasions, such as the disputed presidential election in 2000 between Al Gore and George W. Bush, is it not clear on election day (or the following morning) who won the presidency. Although it is possible for the candidate who has received the most popular votes to lose the electoral vote (as also occurred in 2000), such inversions are infrequent [9].

As it has been mentioned the Electoral College is a controversial mechanism, and the divergence between popular and electoral votes indicates some of the principal advantages and disadvantages of it. Many who favor the system maintain that it provides presidents with a special federative majority and a broad national mandate for governing, unifying the two major parties across the country and requiring broad geographic support to win the presidency. In addition, they argue that the Electoral College protects the interests of small states and sparsely populated areas, which they claim would be ignored if the president was directly elected. Opponents, however, argue that the potential for an undemocratic outcome—in which the winner of the popular vote loses the electoral vote—the bias against third parties and independent candidates, the disincentive for voter turnout in states where one of the parties is clearly dominant, and the possibility of a “faithless” elector who votes for a candidate other than the one to whom he is pledged make the electoral college outmoded and undesirable. Many opponents advocate eliminating the electoral college altogether and replacing it with a direct popular vote [8].

Some advocates of reform, recognizing the enormous constitutional hurdle, instead focus their efforts on passing a so-called National Popular Vote (NPV) bill through state legislatures. State legislatures that enacted the NPV would agree that their state’s electoral votes would be cast for the winner of the national popular vote—even if that person was not the winner of the state’s popular vote. By 2010 several states—including Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, and New Jersey—had adopted the NPV, and it had been passed in at least one legislative house in more than a dozen other states [ibid.].

So, the U.S. presidential election process encompasses a number of interrelated events which include the caucuses and / or primaries that are held within the major political parties, and then party conventions decide upon the final candidates for presidency. These events are followed by the election campaign, the popular vote in November and Electoral College vote in December, and finally in January of the year following the election the Inauguration Ceremony takes place. The idea of primary elections within parties and the notion of Electoral College are relatively harder to grasp for Ukrainian learners as they have no analogy in the Ukrainian system of elections, although recent developments in this country prove that some of the major political parties of Ukraine seem to be assimilating primary elections into their electoral campaigns.

Further elaboration of the topic of this paper may involve investigating the voter registration specifics, the involvement of various civic groups, the third parties’ participation in presidential election and their role in bringing up important issues to the major parties’ political agendas.

A Glossary of U.S. Presidential Election Words

<i>Word</i>	<i>English definition and Ukrainian equivalent</i>
caucus	a) a closed meeting of the members of one party in a legislative chamber, etc., to coordinate policy, choose candidates, etc b) such a bloc of politicians а) закриті збори членів політичної партії (для висунення кандидатів на наступні вибори або для узгодження політичної платформи) б) блок / збори законодавців, які належать до однієї партії
primary election/ primary	(in the US) a preliminary election in which the voters of a state or region choose a party’s convention delegates, nominees for office, etc

	попередні вибори в межах штату / регіону, на яких обираються делегати на з'їзд партії та/або висуваються кандидати від своєї партії на пост президента
closed primary	a primary in which only members of a particular party may vote закриті попередні вибори, у яких мають право голосувати тільки члени певної партії
open primary	a primary in which any registered voter may participate відкриті попередні вибори, у яких може голосувати будь-який громадянин, який зареєструвався для участі у виборах певної партії
presidential primary	voting within a party with the aim to select a presidential nominee голосування всередині партії з метою висування кандидата на посаду президента
direct primary	попередні вибори, на яких виборці прямо голосують за кандидатів на пост a primary in which voters directly select the candidates who will run for office
party convention	the general meeting of party members where the final selection of the party's nominee for the presidential race takes place загальні збори членів партії, на яких остаточно затверджується кандидат від партії, яких візьме участь у виборчих перегонках
popular vote	the votes of all the people who took part in the election голоси виборців; народне голосування
'winner-take-all' rule	the principle, according to which the winner of a popular vote in a state is awarded all Electoral College votes from this state принцип, згідно з яким кандидату, який здобув найбільшу кількість голосів у штаті, присуджуються усі голоси виборців від цього штату
Electoral College	(in the US) the national body elected by the voters of each state to choose the President according to the votes of the people and formally elect the president and vice president (в США) колегія виборців, які голосують за президента згідно з результатами загальних виборів, таким чином формально обираючи президента та віце-президента

swing state	the state where it is impossible to determine the result of the election till the last moment because the candidates have approximately the same number of supporters штат, "що вагається", тобто такій, у якому неможливо визначити результат голосування до останнього моменту, бо основні претенденти мають приблизно однакові шанси на перемогу
general election	a) an election in which representatives are chosen in all constituencies of a state b) (in the US) a national or state election а) вибори, під час яких обираються представники у всіх виборчих округах країни б) (у США) загальнонаціональні вибори
midterm election	congressional and local elections which are held in the middle of a term of office of a president вибори до Конгресу (в США) та до місцевих органів самоврядування, які проводяться посередній терміну перебування президента на посаді
constituency	a district that sends one representative to a legislature виборчий округ, у якому обирається один представник до законодавчого органу

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ВІДОМОСТІ ПРО АВТОРА

Тетяна Дацька – кандидат філологічних наук, доцент кафедри германської філології Кіровоградського державного педагогічного університету імені Володимира Винниченка.

Наукові інтереси: проблеми країнознавства США та Великобританії.